

The search for new time

By Dilip Simeon

(Presented at the Champaran Satyagrah centenary celebrations Patna, April 10, 2017)

The timing of death, like the ending of a story, gives a changed meaning to what preceded it: Mary Catherine Bateson

Nihilism doesn't stand at the door, as Nietzsche told us over a century ago. It has entered the house. We now speak as if belief is the highest form of truth, feelings may freely be substituted for facts, truth is pure illusion and war an eternal condition. Examples of this are visible in all continents; indeed, we are reliably informed that ours is the post-truth era. Let us examine how we have arrived at this situation and what Mahatma Gandhi can tell us about it.

Permanent war: Speaking of Napoleon's place in the advent of modernity, Marx wrote: '*Napoleon was the last stand of revolutionary terrorism against the bourgeois society... He perfected the Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution.*'¹ Two observations from this text are significant for our theme: the advent of permanent war; and the dual aspect of the state as an end in itself and an instrument of conquest. The war unleashed by the French Revolution was the first total war of modernity, it was fought by ideologically motivated soldiers, and required total social mobilization.² The modern tendency toward totalitarianism became visible in the emergence of war as the centripetal force capable of galvanizing social energy on an unprecedented scale. The democratization of the polity was accompanied by the

¹ 'He understood that the essence of the modern state was based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, of private interest... at the same time he still regarded the state as an end in itself and civil life only as a treasurer and his subordinate which must have no will of its own. He perfected the Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution... He fed the egoism of the French nation to complete satiety but demanded also the sacrifice of bourgeois business, enjoyments, wealth, etc., whenever this was required by the political aim of conquest... In his home policy, too, he combated bourgeois society as the opponent of the state which in his own person he still held to be an absolute aim in itself.' *The Holy Family, Marx & Engels, Collected Works*, vol 4; p 123

² Refer the *levee en masse*, the 'democratic' mass conscription of French citizens for service in the Revolutionary War; issued by the National Convention in August 1793

democratization of the military. Over time, this would lead to the implosion of warfare into the social fabric, its' about-turn from national frontiers into national societies.

It has been claimed that the arrangements of 1815 resulted in pan-European peace for most of the nineteenth century. This is correct only if we leave out the uprisings of 1848, the Crimean War and the wars over German unification that led to the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. However, the French revolutionary wars were global in their reach, because the powers involved were colonial empires.³ A broader view of the subsequent period shows the upsurge of war consuming the polities of India, China and Africa, with England, France, Belgium and Holland leading the charge. When combined with Russian expansion in central Asia and Siberia, the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64; the Second Opium War of 1856-60; and the Indian rebellion of 1857; a picture emerges of a world plunged into a vortex of conflict whose locus was European militarism. Man-made famines and epidemics in India and China during the 1870's and 1890's resulted in the deaths of between 32 and 61 million people, a catastrophe that has been named 'late-Victorian holocausts'.⁴

The process continued with the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and the Great War of 1914-18; which was accompanied by the first modern genocide (of Armenians by their Ottoman rulers). The global influenza epidemic of 1918-20 cost 50 to 100 million lives, an impact accelerated by war-related human mobility. The spiral of war continued into the 1930's, with the Japanese invasion of Manchukuo, the Spanish civil war, the Sino Japanese war of 1937-1945, and the Second World War - the end of which was marked by several partitions, which cost the lives of lacs of Indians, including Mahatma Gandhi. Thereafter it spilled over into Korea and Vietnam in the 1950's, the Arab world soon after, and carries on till this day. Depending on how it is calculated, the twentieth century has witnessed the unnatural deaths of between 175 to 250 million people. Frontiers have imploded: terror, war and revolution have merged into one

³ English colonial expansion in India acquired momentum during 1790-1818; followed by incessant annexations and conquest in Punjab and the North West including Afghanistan until 1877. The Government of India's budgetary allocation for the Army grew from 33% in 1863 to 45% of revenue in 1891. European dominion over Africa grew from 10% of the land area to 90% in 20 years from 1875 to 1895

⁴ Mike Davis; *Late Victorian Holocasts*, Verso, London, 2002; p 7

another, as have international war and civil war; militaries and para-militaries; legitimate force and vigilante violence.

Today, language and power are being used to enforce the disappearance of these distinctions. As Orwell put it, war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous. Global capitalism is a society in turmoil, geared toward perpetual conflict. State structures are torn apart by the requirement of social stability and the magnet of militarism. The uneasy balance between capital accumulation and a world order founded on competing nation-states is under constant threat of violent disruption. Capitalism feeds on war, but is also threatened by it – the sobriety of accumulation cannot always accommodate the passions unleashed by organized killing.

Gandhi's confrontation with modern nihilism: The nihilism of our time has three aspects: the annihilation of language; time and life. The three merge into one another in practical politics. It is against this backdrop - of life lived in the shadow of semantic disintegration and total destruction, that we need to assess once again Mahatma Gandhi's life and the message his life signifies. There are four dimensions through which we can re-appropriate Gandhi's political challenge and legacy.

Transformation without hatred: The first is reflected in his campaign for an end to colonial power without animus. When he was in London for the Round Table Conference in 1931, Gandhi decided to visit the mill areas of Lancashire. The police had warned he would be mobbed by angry workers who had lost jobs due to the boycott of English cloth. But he wanted to explain India's case to them. The American journalist William Shirer reported the workers' reactions to Gandhi in the town of Darwen - they instinctively recognised in him "*a man who had devoted his life to helping the poor. They gave him a tumultuous welcome.*" Gandhi was mobbed, but by people filled with admiration, not anger.⁵ A photograph from that day shows a smiling Gandhi in his dhoti surrounded by joyous women workers whose faces shine with love. Other photographs from this trip show similar images of the common English people's love for the man whom their government portrayed as the Empire's chief trouble-maker. There are few, if

⁵ William Shirer; *Gandhi: A Memoir*; London, 1979, p180

any examples of the leader of an anti-colonial struggle whom the citizens of the colonial power held in such affection.

Thus in contra-position to the political tradition exemplified by Machiavelli and Robespierre, for which violence was essential to the act of political foundation, Gandhi made the prescient observation that '*what is granted under fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts*'. This is an insight into the nature of the modern state; but it also questions the assumption of Western political science wherein the foundation of a new order is necessarily marked with violence. Gandhi dispensed with the justification of originary violence, the teleological suspension of ethics. This was a radical departure from the revolutionary political theory of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks and a unique attempt at self-assertion combined with respect for the opponent. Gandhi implanted love at the centre of the new beginning, and he kept this flame alight in the midst of enveloping darkness. His faith in the persistence of the human capacity and need for love and mutual respect was something that transcended the boundary of religion and politics.

Theology and Civil Religion: Flowing from this was his creative challenge to traditional theology and his implicit but radical renovation of civil religion theory. As regards the first, Gandhi is misunderstood because of his refusal to separate religion from politics. This confusion is due to the fact that religion nowadays is treated as a flag of political identification, rather than as a source of philosophical and moral standards. If we used the terms *ethics* in place of *religion*, and *power* for *politics*, the matter would become clearer. Should power be free of moral guidance? Gandhi regarded political activity as the highest sphere of social action, and insisted on informing this action with moral guidelines. Truth for him included *moksha* and self-knowledge; as also justice and social integrity. This is why he refused to separate means and ends – evil means would corrupt the best of ends. For him, *ahimsa* was the means and truth was the goal. Religion and spirituality were not instruments for the pursuit of political power; rather, political activity had to be informed by the best spiritual ideals.

Over centuries, the ancient debate between reason and revelation has acquired a nihilist dimension in the quest for a civic religion. Must political life be governed by divine or human guidance? For centuries the philosophers dodged this far-reaching and intractable query via their focus on the utility of religion rather than its truth - an area of inquiry also known as political theology. The use of religion by the state (civic religion), the use of the state by the priesthood (theocracy), and the elevation of science to an object of belief ('scientism'), tend to strengthen ethical nihilism. This tendency is highlighted by the emergence of propaganda, which makes knowledge and goodness slaves of the state. Often even the high-priests of religion use the separation of religion and politics as a convenient excuse to condone crimes committed by their co-religionists, thus undermining public morality. In stressing the healing power of religion Gandhi challenged theologians to translate their fine-sounding doctrines into reality.

Gandhi addressed these issues directly and from within his faith – which underwent transformation with time and experience. His approach to the relationship between reason and revelation is contained in a response he made in 1936 to the query 'where do you find the seat of authority?' Pointing to his breast, Gandhi said: '*It lies here. I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.*'⁶ As his career progressed he came to the view that '*it is more correct to say Truth is God than to say God is Truth.*' With Tagore he could make the distinction between the all-encompassing religion of humanity and the several faiths, which were manifestations of it. That is what he meant when he said '*I have made the world's faith in God my own.*' This is why the separation of religion and politics was incomprehensible to Gandhi. Answering a query on this issue in 1940, he remarked: *Indeed religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not*

⁶ CWMG, Vol 64 p 71; Discussion with Basil Mathews and others (November 24, 1936)

*less real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality.*⁷

This stance is a clue to Gandhi's implicit belief that given the plethora of faiths, there could be no singular civil religion in India. For him, the issue was not the separation of religion and politics, but of religion and nationalism. This is also the clue to his ecumenical *pravachan sabhas*, where he read passages from all major religious texts, doing his best to convince his fellow Indians that they need not be divided, but in fact could be united by their religious beliefs. It is significant that he continued this practice to the last day of his life. I note in passing that the Pakistan ideal was grounded in the conviction that Islam could function as a civil religion. And for its part, Hindutva resembles State Shinto in Japan. Gandhi's name for communalism was 'irreligion', and he believed these versions of utilitarian religiosity to be perversions of faith and harbingers of disintegration. Gandhi's instincts on this score were correct: it was not possible to establish a stable polity in India based on a 'national' religion. The attempt to enforce a civic religion – the 'nationalisation of religion' as it were, could ignite a colossal legitimization crisis for the Indian state. This has been borne out by the history of partition and its aftermath.

Ideology vs Truth and ahimsa: In current usage the word ideology denotes political belief, the 'party line'. But the matter is far more complicated. Since the 1790's when it first appeared, the word has acquired meanings that serve political purposes, and for that very reason carry the burden of deceit. Ideologies are mixtures of facts, half-truths and convictions, and have emerged as political substitutes for religion. Hannah Arendt called ideology the most devilish form of lie; and described ideological (totalitarian) regimes as being 'secret societies established in broad daylight.'⁸

⁷ CWMG, Vol 71, p 177-178; *Harijan*, February 10, 1940

⁸ Hannah Arendt; *Origins of Totalitarianism*; pp. 606-607. She named three features of ideological thinking; the element of motion, of emancipation from reality, and of logical consistency deriving from an assumed first premise

Ideological systems treat truth as pliable to political convenience: ideology is a corruption of truth. Religion too has succumbed to ideology or ideological manipulation. As a genuinely religious person, Gandhi saw this very clearly. It is worth reflecting that hardly any leading Indian religious personages today show any interest in healing the wounds of communal divisions. In an essay titled *Politics and the Devil*, Leszek Kolakowski referred to ideological states - states whose legitimacy derives from the claim that their rulers are owners of truth - as 'caricatural imitations of theocracy.'⁹ Such states dispense with any distinction between secular and religious authority, concentrating both spiritual and physical power in one place, including the nation itself. Given the authoritarian impulse of ideology, (the beliefs of pacifists or Quakers are not, generally, referred to as ideologies), there has always been a link between ideology and violence. Ideological movements tend to carry a seamless connection, overt or covert, with controlled mobs and private armies. Ideological thinking signifies the end of the dialogic pursuit of truth - it is the marker par-excellence of the age of permanent war. It would not be far-fetched to say that we live in an ideological era; and for that reason have voluntarily imprisoned ourselves in an 'enemy system'.

Gandhi's challenge to ideology arose out of the connection he made between ahimsa and truth. In the face of hostile sloganeering in Bengal in 1940, he remarked, '*I love to hear the words "Down with Gandhism". An 'ism' deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. The real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive. I am eager to see Gandhism wiped out at an earlier date. You should not give yourselves over to sectarianism. I do not belong to any sect. I have never dreamt of establishing any sect. If any sect is established in my name after my death my soul would cry out in anguish*'. On ahimsa too, Gandhi was reluctant to provide a theory: '*to write a treatise on the science of ahimsa is beyond my powers... Let anyone who can systematise ahimsa into a science do so, if indeed it lends itself to such treatment.*'¹⁰

⁹ Leszek Kołakowski; *Modernity on endless trial*; Chicago; (1990); p 189

¹⁰ "To write a treatise on the science of ahimsa is beyond my powers... Action is my domain, and what I understand, according to my lights, to be my duty, and whatever comes my way, I do. All my action is actuated by the spirit of service. Let anyone who can systematise ahimsa into a science do so, if indeed it lends itself to such treatment.. The world does not hunger for shastras. What it craves, and will always crave, is sincere action.. No man has ever been able to describe God fully. The same is true of ahimsa." *Harijan*, March 3, 1946

His approach to non-violence was not tactical or ideological, but metaphysical. One scholar describes it thus: ‘Being a manifestation of Brahman, every living being was divine. Taking life was therefore sacrilegious and a form of deicide.’¹¹ It was his sense of being at one with all Indians – indeed, all humanity – that lay at the root of Gandhi’s charisma.¹² There was never such a thing as Gandhian ideology – nor is it proper to call anyone a Gandhian.

Gandhi’s recuperation of the present: An essential feature of future-oriented ideological thinking is the abolition of lived time as the locus of politics. With their bent towards the future, ideologies convert presence into transience. With their promise of a glorious future that never appears, ideologies are a mode of rendering permanent what economists call deferred gratification. Because of their focus on an ever-retreating horizon of the future, ideologies reduce presence to evanescence. If ‘being is becoming’, where are we? Hence Gandhi’s challenge to ideology was also a manifestation of his political resuscitation of the Present. His apparent disregard of ‘history’ was a reflection of this approach. Asked by an imaginary interlocutor (in *Hind Swaraj*) for historical evidence on what he called soul-force or truth-force, Gandhi replies that the continued existence of human life despite incessant wars was proof enough. It was war and violence that made news, not the everyday love and co-operation that characterised the lives of millions. History was a record of interruptions; of ‘*every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul... you cannot expect silver ore in a tin mine.*’ He also clung to his belief in the human capacity for betterment: ‘*To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man.*’¹³

¹¹ “Gandhi rejected violence on four grounds: the ontological, the epistemological, the moral and the practical. Being a manifestation of *Brahman*, every living being was divine. Taking life was therefore sacrilegious and a form of deicide.” Bhikhu Parekh; *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*; New Delhi 1989, p 155.

¹² “There can be no rule-books of Gandhian policy. There are no easy Gandhian formulae. This, however, does not necessarily reduce the value of Gandhi’s teaching in the contemporary political situation. After all, the indication of direction that a compass-needle gives is of some value in itself, even if it takes no consideration of the terrain through which we must pass.” Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, in *Gandhi and the Nuclear Age*, 1965, p130

¹³ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, (1909), Ahmedabad, 2003; pp 67 and 57

Conclusion: Amidst the never-ending debate about the nature and origins of modernity, it is sometimes forgotten that criticisms of modernity have emanated from both right and left, from the side of nostalgia for tradition, as well as that of the supremacy of science and reason. I will not enter that debate, except for one point that is relevant to our theme. In his focus upon violence and ahimsa Gandhi had grasped the central feature of modernity viz., militarism. Militarism was not only the basis of the colonial system that had subjugated India, but had seeped into the very bowels of society, corrupting its thought processes as well as its capacity to sustain itself and maintain an ecological balance between humans and nature.

Gandhi was a Mahatma, but one who was never at peace with his own people, nor they with him. But he manifested what was best in them, so much that even those who celebrate his assassination are obliged deceitfully to own him. Many of his contemporaries were pessimists even when there was hope. But Gandhi spoke of love and mutual respect in the midst of carnage and hatred; he gave people hope in the midst of despair; he appealed to their better instincts at the worst of times. The message of his fast in January 1948 is a message from a man of extraordinary strength and courage. After he died, politicians argued about whether he was the father or the son of the nation. It would be more accurate to say that the Mahatma's last sacrifice became the foundation of India's secular constitution.

As to whether ahimsa is bound to fail, it is sufficient to recall the words of Martin Luther King: '*the choice today is not between violence and non-violence; it is between non-violence and extinction.*' Could it be true that harmony and goodness are independent of violence, and exist on their own? Here is what Gandhi said about this: '*Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn.*' We may also remember Edmund Burke: 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' The Mahatma is not just an icon of the good man in an age of genocide and utter barbarity. His steadfastness and love for truth will, like that of Socrates, shine for centuries. Those who hate and slander him are spitting at the moon. They will disappear into the mists of time. Gandhi will never be forgotten.